

Fwd: webworld.html

From: Lloyd G. Rasmussen (lras@loc.gov)

Date: Thu Jan 02 1997 - 05:20:51 PST

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The Tower of Babel continues. "Accessible" is in the eye of the producer. Stay tuned!

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From: Lloyd G. Rasmussen <lras>

To: lras@loc.gov

Date: Tue, 31 Dec 1996 23:23:15 -0500

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Web world tuning Java, HTML for TV

By Junko Yoshida

SAN MATEO, Calif. -- Expecting television-based Internet access to swell the population of Net surfers, information-appliance vendors and software developers are separately working on Java subsets and Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) extensions that would make Web content for the TV platform look, sound and function more like standard television fare.

WebTV Networks Inc. (Palo Alto, Calif.), PowerTV Inc. (Cupertino, Calif.) and ViewCall America (Norcross, Ga.) all confirmed last week that they're developing their own HTML extensions or tags with TV access in mind. And both Steve Perlman, WebTV Networks' president and chief executive officer, and Ken Morse, chief technical officer at PowerTV, said their companies are separately working with JavaSoft to develop Java subsets for TV-based content. Perlman said WebTV's Java subset could be ready by February or March.

The flurry of activity is stirring interest among content developers

intrigued by the prospect of bringing their Internet offerings to a potential market of 800 million TV-owning households worldwide. Some of the confirmed HTML and Java projects, however, aren't yet ready for prime time.

A JavaSoft spokeswoman stressed that there is "no formal project or no product plan at JavaSoft right now" for a TV-tweaked Java subset. "If anything, it's an experiment in our lab," she said. "People at WebTV have had some conversations with people here and may be doing some tinkering. But it's not clear when, if ever, anything that they might be working on with JavaSoft engineers will be published."

The proliferation of independent initiatives, meanwhile, could force content developers to publish multiple versions of their Web sites for an ungainly range of appliances. Development of a TV-specific Java subset also might mean that Java applets could no longer be guaranteed to run on any platform.

Yet Internet-appliance vendors insist that Java's run times, application-programming interface (API) and applets are simply too unwieldy to be manageable on memory-constrained set-tops. "In our WebTV box, we only have 2 Mbytes of memory," said Perlman. "We need a subset of Java."

PowerTV's Morse acknowledged the desirability of a standard subset, but claimed that "the PowerTV set-top today has full Java applets up and running in our lab." PowerTV set-tops, such as the Pegasus box ordered by Time Warner Cable, use 2 Mbytes of DRAM for MPEG decoding and graphics and 1 Mbyte for the CPU. A built-in, unified-memory-management system allows the memory units to be dynamically shared between the two ASICs. The box also has 1 Mbyte of flash and 1 Mbyte of ROM.

Indisputable push

Partisan differences aside, few would dispute the industrywide momentum to recast the Internet for TV. "We've already solved display issues and cost issues," said WebTV's Perlman, who has taken the first stab at bringing the Web to TV with partners Sony and Philips. "The Internet is already accessible to TV viewers."

The unresolved issues, he said, concern "content -- how to make Web sites more attractive and entertaining to the TV audience."

"Most viewers are not looking for the experience of wading through the deep water of interactivity on a TV," said WebTV evangelist John Lee. "They also expect to see cool, TV-like transitions from one page to another."

Jon Haass, director and product marketing manager at OpenTV-platform and -middleware developer Thomson Sun Interactive, said that those working to fine-tune HTML should keep in mind that "horizontal scrawling is bad on TV" and that the presentation of "too much text on a page, as well as too many pages, is also discouraging to TV viewers."

The industry seeks a set of HTML tags that would give developers tighter control over content delivery and display, said WebTV's Lee. WebTV's published versions 1.0 and 1.1 of the WebTV HTML interface detail WebTV-specific performance and functions, style guides, new tags, attributes and underlying technology for handling text, graphics and sound.

Before this year is out, Lee said, WebTV will disclose its HTML extension efforts "together with companies in the software industry, Web-page designers and very large names in the content business."

ViewCall America, an Internet-service company targeting the non-PC consumer market, is also pursuing development of a "lingua franca" for creating TV-centric Web sites, said editorial director George Donahue.

Despite TV HTML's trademark status, Donahue said, ViewCall's "plan is to keep TV HTML as an open standard. The company hopes to make sure that TV HTML will run on various browsers as well as a variety of TV platforms." By contrast, he said, "WebTV appears to be building proprietary WebTV HTML Interfaces for their platform."

The ViewCall work is still in its early stages. "We are identifying necessary tags now and plan to create them as we go along," said Donahue. The company plans to publish a list of completed and planned special tags by the spring.

PowerTV's Morse outlined three main HTML issues: "supporting effective video overlay, so we can overlay Web pages on TV programming; defining video positioning, to allow video in a window; and defining URL support for TV channel tuning."

PowerTV is working on all three issues and seeks collective action from an industry-wide forum. Morse said the company has submitted a proposal to the Association for Interactive Media (AIM), a Washington-based trade association that will review feature requirements brought to the table by member companies.

The extent of AIM's ability to build industry consensus, however, remains unknown. Peter Waldheim, chief executive officer of the organization, said AIM's User Interface Council -- one of several leadership councils within the group -- will likely touch on the HTML-extension issue for the TV platform. But he cautioned that the work is "still in the exploration phase. Exactly how each leadership council chooses its specific missions will need to go through a two- or three-month voting period first."

Meanwhile, not everyone agrees that HTML extensions are necessary. Thomson Sun Interactive's Haass, describing its TV-content HTML guidelines as "TVML," said the company is "not trying to change HTML. What we call TVML is still the same HTML."

Rather than expect Web-page designers to develop multiple versions of the same Web pages for different platforms, Haass said that a more

sensible approach might be to "filter necessary Web pages at head ends." Network operators would use filtering systems to put Web pages in the appropriate format for the intended platform.

Even as they pitch their independent approaches, Internet-platform vendors say standards are the goal. The current confusion, said PowerTV's Morse, "may be a little divergence that may last a short time -- a year or so."

After that, de facto standards will emerge as developers pick the best of the available options.

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